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# CATCH THEM Young

By A. VENKATA NARAYANA

**T**housands of excited tennis lovers, parents and kids filled the grounds of the Delhi Lawn Tennis Association on December 3, 2005, to see the new face of tennis in India—which now includes young women stars. It was not a Davis Cup or Federation Cup match, but a tennis clinic conducted by Indian tennis sensation Sania Mirza, Indian-American player Shikha Uberoi, doubles grand slam ace Mahesh Bhupathi and former Wimbledon champion Richard Krajicek of the Netherlands.

It was a rare opportunity for hundreds of kids to learn a few basic and technical skills of the game and chat with their favorites. “I wanted to use this opportunity and learn a few trademark forehand shots from Sania,” said nine-year-old Simran

Kaur Sethi, who has been playing for three years. “I met Sania in Delhi earlier, but I did not get a chance to play with her. I am excited today because I got the chance to rally a few balls with Sania and Shikha, my idols,” said Simran, who could hardly conceal her joy.

“Every great champion goes through the process at some tennis clinic or the other during her or his formative years. It is important that players like Sania, who generates excitement and mass hysteria, have been part of the clinic,” says Shikha. “Sania and I participated in a few such tennis clinics last year and the most significant point is that girls outnumbered boys at most of them. Girls are interested to take up tennis and a lot of them want to play at the competitive level. I feel satisfied if I am able to help and inspire a few kids at these clinics.”

Until last year, the power of women in Indian tennis was virtually unknown. But suddenly the country is dreaming of becoming a world tennis power one day. Sania and the Uberoi sisters (Shikha, 22, and Neha, 19) have competed well in the

world championships and the Grand Slam events. Though Shikha and Neha have had modest success on the international circuit, they enjoyed a spectacular run at the junior level in the United States. Shikha was born in Mumbai before her family moved to the United States, where Neha was born. Shikha joined the Indian Federation Cup team last year and provided a boost toward the team’s second place finish in the Asia-Oceania zone. Neha is not far behind and hopes to don Indian colors for the Federation Cup if an opportunity arises. The sisters have been doubles partners in several tournaments, and they displayed the fighting spirit in the Sunfeast Open 2005 international women’s tennis tournament in Calcutta in September, reaching the finals.

Shikha, who began playing tennis at the age of six, sees a lot of talent, but a shortage of opportunity, in India. “To succeed at the international level, we have to do a lot of things, like catching them young at school. Unfortunately, many parents in India do not

*Left: Shikha Uberoi plays against Anastasia Myskina of Russia during their singles quarterfinal match at the Sunfeast WTA Open in Calcutta in September 2005. Myskina won 6-4, 6-2.*

*Right: Neha (left) and sister Shikha hug their father, Mahesh Uberoi, to celebrate their victory in the Sunfeast tournament doubles semifinal in Calcutta. The Uberoi sisters won 7-6, 1-6, 6-3 against Melinda Czink of Hungary and Yuliana Fedak of Ukraine.*



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encourage their daughters to take part in sports and games. Sports are not normal in households yet; there may be a few exceptions. To make it more popular, obviously sports as a curriculum has to be introduced at the school level. Both schools and the government have to work in tandem to develop sports facilities and encourage kids to be competitive right from the beginning.”

Shikha tried other sports before deciding to play tennis. “My father, who used to play only recreationally, was my first coach. That’s how it all started. Later, when I was about 12, I joined a professional tennis academy in New Jersey. And when I was about 18 our family shifted to Florida, where I got training at the world famous Harry Hopman Tennis Academy in Tampa. Because of intensive coaching and

rigorous fitness training I [was able to play in] many tournaments at the school, county and state level. When I was about 18 I had the great honor to play for the U.S. national junior team,” says Shikha. She became the top junior women’s player from Florida and was among the top five in the United States.

The Uberoi sisters draw inspiration from American tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams, who live about 50 kilometers away in Florida. Shikha admires the Williams sisters’ competitive spirit.

Shikha says sports has progressed in the United States because every high school or middle school has a soccer, football, basketball or tennis team, for girls *and* boys. “Sports is advocated in the routine. The competition was very tough as there were a lot of players, and this helped us get stronger to compete in international

tournaments. Also, the sponsorship and endorsement scenario is very bright and many players derive a benefit from it once they are in a winning rhythm.”

The U.S. Tennis Association conducts tournaments year-round, all over the country. “The difference of approach to sports in the United States and India is that it is being promoted at the grassroots level. The national federations can only organize tournaments and encourage the top talent, but the real nurturing should come from the local level,” says Shikha. The challenges for girls are greater in India as compared to America, because of reasons connected with family, school and society, she notes.

“Depth in women’s tennis in India has increased over the years. We need to inspire younger players to play the game and pick up from where Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi left off,” she says. “The whole school system is built around academics. It does not give you any opportunity to have a creative mind either in sports or music. I think that is the worst thing happening. It is hurting the kids so much by putting them under pressure.”

The power of women in tennis could be realized if they have a goal, says Shikha. “It is really important to have a goal, combined with self-belief, which will help them to come out stronger in all situations.” □

## India's Rising Star

“I think people in India are really excited, obviously, because they’ve never had a woman play at this level before. It’s really nice to know that they are appreciating my efforts....I just hope that about five years from now we have a lot more women players from India competing at the international level.”

—Sania Mirza  
after the U.S. Open  
in New York

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